

## **LAUDATO SI' – THE MERCIFUL SOLIDARITY**

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**Abstract:** *Laudato si'*, published in 2015, represents Pope Francis' first social encyclical letter. It has a close connection with two other social documents: *Rerum novarum* (1891) and *Gaudium et spes* (1965). *Laudato si'* follows the steps of these revolutionary documents, treating the nowadays “new things” and concerning about the right way to interpret the signs of time.

The central motif of interconnection presents in *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis underlining the profound relationship between the welfare of the natural environment and human well-being. In the current globalised context, the interdependence between states creates the conception of a single world, and for this reason, is necessary a joint plan.

Pope Francis asks for clear solutions and cooperation, especially in ceasing or at least reducing the damages brought upon “Mother Earth”, and, simultaneously, invites the international community to solidarity and collaboration, as an answer to the globalisation of indifference.

*Laudato si'* sees the creation as a family. Each creature is considered to be as a sibling for the human being – in other words, it is about of a fraternity of the creation, an ecologic order oriented towards truth, kindness and beauty. Having the same Creator, the humans and nature are on the same road of solidarity, therefore merciful solidarity must be shown to all, as this calling is enrooted in God's love for every creature.

**Keywords:** ecology, Pope Francis, solidarity, cooperation, family, environment, relation, collaboration, responsibility, mercifulness, merciful solidarity, responsibility.

### **Introduction**

In a globalised world marked by problems and crises, solidarity can represent a solution and tool the international community can use to protect the common good. In this article, structured in three paragraphs, it will be presented the newness brought by *Laudato si'*, the first social encyclical signed by Pope Francis. As this year we celebrate five years since its publication, we must familiarise with Pope Francis' view about solidarity, as its uniqueness can help us, the communities in we live in, pay more attention to the changes that occur in the world and nature.

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## 1. Newness and continuity

The year 2015 represents a pivotal year for the Church's social doctrine. Pope Francis signs the encyclical *Laudato si'*, a document which is a part of the Catholic social teaching, but, in the same time, it brings a new approach regarding the principle of solidarity and its application in nowadays situation.

*Laudato si'* can be appreciated in the light of two relevant documents of the Church, *Rerum novarum* (1891) and *Gaudium et spes* (1965). In 1891, pope Leon XIII laid the base of the Catholic social teaching through *Rerum novarum*. "The new things" treated in this encyclical were the social events and economic transformation that had an impact on the society, especially in Europe. In this letter, Pope Leon XIII condemns the abuses, social inequality and the unjustness in economic affairs. In the same time, the Pope calls the society to respect the workers' rights and to choose the balance between socialism and capitalism. Moreover, the Pontiff asks the exercise of the moral principles deep-rooted in the Church Tradition as well as in the Scriptures, to reduce the inequality between the rich and poor, the powerful and weak<sup>1</sup>. Regarding this fact, in the 15th paragraph of *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis expresses his hope that "at this Encyclical Letter, which is now added to the body of the Church's social teaching, can help us to acknowledge the appeal, immensity and urgency of the challenge we face"<sup>2</sup>

The second document with a close relation with *Laudato si'* is the Apostolic Constitution of the Second Council of Vatican *Gaudium et spes* (1965). This document marked a new chapter in the history of the relationship between the Church and the world. The Church is called to read the signs of time and to understand the ambitions and sufferings of the entire world society. This Constitution has offered the laypeople a mandate to be active and visible in this world in the name of the Gospel and of Jesus Christ<sup>3</sup>.

*Laudato si'* follows the steps of these revolutionary documents, treating the "new things" of nowadays and concerning about the right way to interpret the signs of time. For example, regarding the climate change issue, Pope Francis considers this situation not as a regional problem, but a global one, which involves the entire world. This global crisis requires responsibility, solidarity and awareness from the international community. There is only one situation, with a varied form of manifestations most of them

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. ANNET, „Our Common Responsibility for Our Common Home: The Activist Vision of *Laudato si'*“, in F. PASQUALE (ed.), *Care for the World. Laudato si' and Catholic Social Thought in an Era of Climate Crisis*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019, 25.

<sup>2</sup> FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 15: AAS 107 (2015), 853.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. A. ANNET, „Our Common Responsibility for Our Common Home: The Activist Vision of *Laudato si'*“, 26.

having severe social, economic and political implications. “Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day”<sup>4</sup>.

Giving the fact that this document is a social encyclical, the letter is built to engage a dialogue with the humanity, starting from the traditional principles of Catholic social teaching, such as the common good, considered to be “a central and unifying principle of social ethics”<sup>5</sup>. The common good is the welfare of social life, which cannot be received as a plurality of individual rights, but as the welfare of an entire community – speaking of a social group or a person, no one must be ignored. The principle of the common good is animated by solidarity. For Pope Francis, solidarity involves the moral imperative of the first option towards the poor and the right distribution of natural resources. Moreover, it implies an original thoughtfulness considering the community and the priority of life, which must be lived to give the poor what they deserve<sup>6</sup>.

The central motif of interconnection is well presented in *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis underlining the profound relationship between the welfare of the natural environment and human well-being. In the current globalised context, the interdependence between states creates the conception of a single world, and for this reason, is necessary a joint plan. For example, climate change affects every human being regardless of state borders or conventional delimitations. Climate is a common good; it belongs to each human and creature, and for this reason, ecological problems must be considered as global issues, that demand comprehensive and global solutions<sup>7</sup>. The call addressed by Francis towards the international community is a decisive request, as it is expected a rapid and progressive answer.

Pope Francis proposes solidarity as a way to respond to human interdependence. This implies that parallel with the economic and social growth of the world, solidarity gains more value. This social principle is frequently presented as a unifying force, that transpasses frontiers, social categories, languages and religious faith. *Laudato si'* is offering “a common destiny” in which the entire world is involved<sup>8</sup>. Without solidarity, globalisation degrades humanity and becomes globalisation of indifference. To avoid this delicate situation, this must bound is well kept and preserved and helped to extend towards the future generations, so that the presents

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<sup>4</sup> FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 25: AAS 107 (2015), 857.

<sup>5</sup> FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 156: AAS 107 (2015), 910.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 10: AAS 107 (2015), 851.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 23: AAS 107 (2015), 856.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 159: AAS 107 (2015), 911.

generations acknowledge their duties for the future and clear an unbecoming culture of waste<sup>9</sup>.

The newness brought by *Laudato si'* in the Church's social teaching is the fact that an individualistic approach cannot be possible in the current context. The entire humanity is united, as regional problems and crises quickly evolve in delicate global situations: the provocation is that all the states and human beings must recognise themselves as dependent of one another and to take actions considering the values of trustworthiness and justice. Moreover, Pope Francis, using the concept of "family", extends the responsibility for the "other one" to the creation – in this manner, what owes the human being for his neighbour must be shown towards the other people from nature. *Laudato si'* brings a new vision upon the principle of solidarity, that sees the ecological order in familial terms. The force of the "family" concept from this encyclical letter lies in the ability to imagine an environmental system in which the human and the other creatures are considered a diverse family, an extended ecological family.

## 2. The globalisation of solidarity

"What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?"<sup>10</sup> – this question represents the leit-motif of *Laudato si'* and starting from this, Pope Francis builds up his description of the crises affecting the human and his calling addressed those in leading positions, inviting them to assume responsibility for "our common home"<sup>11</sup>.

Pope Francis asks for clear solutions and cooperation, especially in ceasing or at least reducing the damages brought upon "Mother Earth", and, simultaneously, invites the international community to solidarity and collaboration, as an answer to the globalisation of indifference. Climate changes and the other environmental issues regard only one region or state, but the entire world: "We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all"<sup>12</sup>. Everyone is united under the mark of unprecedented crises – unprecedented environmental damage: "The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek sustainable and integral development,

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. A. ANNETT, "Our Common Responsibility for Our Common Home: The Activist Vision of *Laudato si'*", 30.

<sup>10</sup> FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 160: AAS 107 (2015), 911.

<sup>11</sup> FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 19: AAS 107 (2015), 854.

<sup>12</sup> FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 14: AAS 107 (2015), 852.

for we know that things can change”<sup>13</sup>. Afterwards, Pope Francis continues: “I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet”<sup>14</sup>.

Despite the danger of human civilisation’s collapse, an evident ray of hope crosses the letter, as Pope Francis states: “yet all is not lost”<sup>15</sup>, especially when humanity still has the power and capacity to get involved and to work together to build up the world and to defend life. *Laudato si'* describes a different kind of problems, such as global warming, loss of biodiversity, chemical disasters and pollution, massive deforestation, lack of water, but also social issues regarding social inequality, greed and indigence. This itinerary is well presented in the 15th paragraph of the encyclical:

I will begin by briefly reviewing several aspects of the present ecological crisis, to draw on the results of the best scientific research available today, letting them touch us deeply and provide a concrete foundation for the ethical and spiritual itinerary that follows. I will then consider some principles drawn from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which can render our commitment to the environment more coherent. I will then attempt to get to the roots of the present situation, to consider not only its symptoms but also its deepest causes. This will help to provide an approach to ecology which respects our unique place as human beings in this world and our relationship to our surroundings. In light of this reflection, I will advance some broader proposals for dialogue and action which would involve each of us as individuals, and also affect international policy. Finally, convinced as I am that change is impossible without motivation and a process of education, I will offer some inspired guidelines for human development to be found in the treasure of Christian spiritual experience<sup>16</sup>.

A specific aspect of *Laudato si'* is the fact that social and environmental issues are analysed not separately. However, as a single problem, although complex, that involves the entire humanity. In essence, Pope Francis asks all people to hear the cry of the earth, as well as of the persons.

Nonetheless, the climate change phenomena<sup>17</sup> manifest on several plans and affect the utmost of human life: temperature and rainfall fluctuation, iceberg melting, rising of the sea level, sea current changes, all of these problems represent an urgent call to unity and collaboration between the states that form the international community. It is not surprising that Pope Francis offers ample space presenting these delicate situations in his encyclical letter. What is considered to be healthy, soon it will be changed

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<sup>13</sup> FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 13: AAS 107 (2015), 852.

<sup>14</sup> FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 14: AAS 107 (2015), 852.

<sup>15</sup> FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 205: AAS 107 (2015), 928.

<sup>16</sup> FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 15: AAS 107 (2015), 853.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 23: AAS 107 (2015), 856.

because many of these extreme phenomena create a vicious circle that worsens the vital natural resources' situation, such as freshwater. Pope Francis underlines the fact that the developing states and the poor one will be the first to suffer because of these fatal changes, therefore he calls to responsibility and awareness of the effects of personal actions on the natural environment<sup>18</sup>.

The biodiversity, whom degradation and loss are wailed in *Laudato si'*, is interconnected with the entire creation, but, in the same time, with the humanity, as it sustains human life; hence, this encyclical letter manifests the concern regarding the irresponsibility shown the states towards nature. Other creatures have their one dignity, and therefore they don't exist to be exploited, but to offer praise to God and to communicate their message. The human has neither the power nor the right to take advantage of these resources, represented by flora and fauna, so he must get truly involved in protecting and promoting the natural treasures<sup>19</sup>.

These changes modify the future of humankind, as the environmental crises are tied with the social one. Social degradation is caused by a lack of vital resources and accentuate poverty, especially in developing countries, where the inhabitants become victims of the greed shown by the developed countries. The Pope suggests an ethics of international relations, in which is avoided the economic exploitation of the South and the North is protected from vicious greed; hence Pope Francis speaks about "an ecological duty" accumulated, through pollution and brutal exploration of natural resources, by the developed countries towards the emerging countries:

The land of the southern poor is rich and mostly unpolluted, yet access to ownership of goods and resources for meeting vital needs is inhibited by a system of commercial relations and ownership which is structurally perverse. The developed countries ought to help pay this debt by significantly limiting their consumption of non-renewable energy and by assisting poorer countries to support policies and programmes of sustainable development<sup>20</sup>.

Facing a waste and chaotic culture, neither the urban environment nor the developed world is free from different kind of crises; Pope Francis identifies an uncontrolled economic growth that transformed the cities and towns in unfriendly places, not only speaking of health or pollution but also the spiritual perspective – the human is condemned to live his life in a concrete jungle, deprived of direct contact with nature. The description

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. G. CEBALLOS, "Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, Global environmental risks and the future of Humanity", in *The Quarterly Review of Biology*, vol. XCI, nr. 3/2016, 287-288.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 33-34: AAS 107 (2015), 860-861.

<sup>20</sup> FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 52: AAS 107 (2015), 868.



made by the Pope in *Laudato si'* may be considered a pessimistic one, but in fact, there is a ray of hope that shows the reader that the human freedom still has the power and will succeed to transform this drama in harmony and love.

Considering this variety of problems and issues, the answer expected from the humanity must be marked by solidarity, which must be inclusive and merciful – this is the remedy for this economy of exclusion and indifference, *Laudato si'* expresses an expansive view on solidarity, underlining the fact that this social principle crosses over space and include all poor and marginalised persons, and also the wealthy<sup>21</sup>.

This aspect will be presented in the following, enhancing the concept of “family” used by pope Francis to demonstrate the unity between human beings and with the entire nature.

### 3. The inclusive and merciful solidarity

The fourth chapter of *Laudato si'* represents the centre of the newness brought by Pope Francis to the Catholic social teaching; he promotes an integral ecology as an emergent paradigm of justice, an ecology that respects the unique place of the humanity in this world and the relationship between human and environment. Actually, nature cannot be considered separate from the human life or at least a space in which the human lives, but a unity: “if everything is related, then the health of a society’s institutions has consequences for the environment and the quality of human life. Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment”<sup>22</sup>.

Human ecology is unseparated from the notion of the common good, but must be understood in a specific manner: nowadays, while there are many human rights violations, someone being involved in protecting the common good means to make decisions in solidarity, founded on “a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters”<sup>23</sup>. By following this way, future generations will inherit a more sustainable world. Integral ecology implies the quotidian life of each of one of us. Therefore, this encyclic manifests great attention on this aspect underling the fact that it is necessary to build and renew this sentiment of responsibility and to avoid natural resources exploitation<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. T. R. ROURKE, *The roots of Pope Francis’ social and political thought*, Rowman & Littlefield, Londra 2018, 144.

<sup>22</sup> FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 142: AAS 107 (2015), 904.

<sup>23</sup> FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 158: AAS 107 (2015), 910.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. A. ANNETT, “*Laudato si'* and Inclusive Solidarity: The Ideology of the Market and the Reality of Inequality”, in S. ZAMAGNI – M. S. SORONDO (coord.), *Inclusive Solidarity and Integration of Marginalized People*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2017, 51-53.

Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal<sup>25</sup>.

The principal solidarity developed by Pope Francis in this encyclical is followed by a strong sense of moral responsibility associated with the feeling of being part of a community or fraternity. The moral imperative of a solidary action is connected to attaining common good; therefore, it implies reciprocity. For that matter, solidarity is closely linked to the concept of “us” – identification with a group or community. But this situation can lead to delicate conditions and problems, especially when the common good is desired only for the members of that group. Pope Francis wants to avoid this interpretation and to open up solidarity towards universality – for that purpose, human solidarity becomes “concern about the other”, which opposes “the group solidarity”<sup>26</sup>.

The culture of inclusive solidarity has the opportunity to develop and to pervade only through the formation of civil virtues in the context of social relationships; inclusive solidarity demands that these social relations protect and promote equal rights and dignity of both sides involved. As a matter of fact, in *Laudato si'* for many occasions, the theme of taking care of “our common home” is articulated. Pope Francis uses phrases such as “family”, “common legacy”, “a mutual relation” to connect his vision of solidarity and to deepen this call addressed to the entire humanity. He asks the human beings to take part in this dialogue which involves everyone, as the universe is a unique family<sup>27</sup>.

Pope Francis sees the creation as a family; each creature is considered to be as a sibling for the human being – in other words, it is about of a fraternity of the creation, an ecologic order oriented towards truth, kindness and beauty. This principle and concept are in a close connection and based on equal human dignity. Pope Francis develops in this letter special ecological solidarity – he succeeds to use this concept of “family”, to extend the object of the principle of solidarity to include the ecological order too<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 202: AAS 107 (2015), 927.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. E. HAŁAS, “Building a Culture of Inclusive Solidarity”, in S. ZAMAGNI – M.S. SORONDO (coord.), *Inclusive Solidarity and Integration of Marginalized People*, 81-85.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. R. MINNERATH, “A culture of Inclusive Solidarity”, in S. ZAMAGNI – M.S. SORONDO (coord.), *Inclusive Solidarity and Integration of Marginalized People*, 97-98.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 11: AAS 107 (2015), 851.



The relational ecology is vital for justice and also for the ecological perspective, an answer for the waste culture. The Pope describes an ecological spirituality based upon the cosmic unity, which is the theological fundament of the dialogue about the future of our common home and the role of solidarity in creating a context of mercifulness involving all: human and the other creatures<sup>29</sup>.

In his perspective, Pope Francis considers mercy as a way to help the other in need: is an intervention of solidarity. Merciful solidarity, under the Pontificate of Francis, became a key concept and social priority. Through this concept, all the affirmations of Francis about solidarity must be considered<sup>30</sup>.

As it was stated, the fundament of solidarity is the equality in the dignity of all humans – they are persons as they were created “in the image of God”. Pope Francis calls to the recognition of humanity as a unique family, without borderlines or obstacles. However, in the 53rd paragraph of the letter, Pope Francis extends this cry for solidarity towards “our sister earth”<sup>31</sup>, proclaiming, therefore, the unity of the ecological family. By declaring the earth as the sister of human, this affirmation takes the discussion about solidarity on a different level: the human being is not only responsible for this neighbour, but also for the creation<sup>32</sup>.

## Conclusion

Having the same Creator, the human and nature are on the same road of solidarity, therefore mercy must be shown to all. This calling is enrooted in God's love for every creature:

When our hearts are authentically open to universal communion, this sense of fraternity excludes nothing and no one. It follows that our indifference or cruelty towards fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings. We have only one heart, and the same wretchedness, which leads us to mistreat an animal will not be long in showing itself in our relationships with other people. Every act of cruelty towards any creature is contrary to human dignity. We can hardly consider ourselves to be fully loving if we disregard any aspect of reality: “Peace, justice and the preservation of creation are three absolutely interconnected themes, which cannot be

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. G. CEBALLOS, “Pope Francis’ Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’*, Global environmental risks and the future of Humanity”, 287.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. N. M. FLORES, “Our sister, Mother Earth: Solidarity and Familial Ecology in *Laudato si’*”, 467-468.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’*, 53: AAS 107 (2015), 868.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. N.M. FLORES, “Our sister, Mother Earth: Solidarity and Familial Ecology in *Laudato si’*”, 469.

separated and treated individually without once again falling into reductionism". Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> FRANCIS, The Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'*, 92: AAS 107 (2015), 884.